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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 FREETOWN 000776

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SUBJECT: SIERRA LEONE'S RULING PARTY THREATENS RIVALS

REF: A. FREETOWN 681

[1](#)B. 05 FREETOWN 960

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas N. Hull, reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) During a recent trip to ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) strongholds in southern and eastern Sierra Leone to gauge the popularity of Charles Margai's SLPP breakaway party, the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), PolOff found a disturbing pattern of manipulation, intimidation, and repression by local SLPP officials and followers against opposition parties, especially the PMDC. Unless checked by the National Electoral Commission (NEC), the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), civil society, and the international community, these abuses could undermine election preparations and potentially destabilize the country. The SLPP's hardball tactics, which are historically characteristic of local politics, reflect the threat posed by the surprisingly well developed PMDC in the SLPP's heartland and the larger threat presented by the reapportionment of parliamentary districts to other regions of the country. End Summary.

Upcountry Trip Reveals Disturbing Trend

[1](#)2. (C) On September 6-9, PolOff and PolAsst traveled to traditional Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) strongholds in Bo, Pujehun, and Kenema to gauge the popularity of Charles Margai's new SLPP breakaway party, the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC). Margai, a lawyer and former government minister whose uncle and father were Sierra Leone's first post-independence prime ministers, broke from the SLPP after the September 2005 party convention where President Kabbah railroaded the nomination of Vice President Berewa to be the SLPP standard bearer. Unlike the more established but ossified opposition All People's Congress (APC) party, PMDC members in the south and the east displayed energy and momentum. This has not gone unnoticed by the ruling SLPP party elite, and we heard numerous reports of PMDC supporters who had suffered for their new political allegiance. (COMMENT: We heard reports from APC supporters who have suffered as well, but the PMDC supporters appear to be the primary targets of intimidation and retribution in this region. END COMMENT.)

[1](#)3. (C) We heard reports about civil servants who were removed from government housing, teachers at government schools who

had been fired, and chieftdom authorities who were suspended and replaced. In Bo District, one of the civil servants who lost his government house was reportedly a senior mines monitor with the Ministry of Mines and Mineral Resources.

¶4. (C) We also heard reports about PMDC supporters whose homes were marked for demolition, received death threats and had been assaulted, been denied meetings, were punished after attending political meetings, and denied access to microcredit, seed rice, and other benefits given to SLPP members. We heard a report that in June, the Gallinasperi chieftdom court (Pujehun District) jailed a PMDC supporter for three days without food and fined him 120,000 leones (approximately USD 40) for holding an "illegal" meeting. A house built by a reverend in Bo was reportedly marked for demolition in spite of a previous clearance to build on government land. The reverend was described as a "PMDC sympathizer."

¶5. (C) We also heard about retribution against PMDC supporters' family members, particularly threats and job suspension of elderly parents. In one case that reportedly occurred in late August, the Barri paramount chief's brother spotted a young man wearing a PMDC teeshirt. He summoned the young man to the paramount chief's house, and when he got there, the paramount chief ordered him to remove his PMDC teeshirt. When the young man refused, the paramount chief summoned the man's mother and told her that if she could not convince her son to remove his teeshirt, she would be "dealt with." The young man told PolOff that his mother had been effectively banished from her own village, and that he now needs to bring her to Freetown so that she will feel safe.

¶6. (C) Some of the more disturbing reports were about the

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role that many paramount chiefs have taken to suppress SLPP opposition. We heard several reports of paramount chiefs firing or suspending section chiefs for supporting the PMDC and refusing requests from opposition parties to hold public meetings. Paramount chiefs' loyalty is often rewarded with a blind eye when it comes to spending public money for private gain. One example we heard was the Ngowa Paramount Chief, who was given seven million leones (approximately USD 2,300) for HIV/AIDS sensitization in July (Note: Funding possibly came from a project funded by the National AIDS Secretariat, which receives money from the Global Fund and World Bank. End Note). Soon after he received the money, he used it to travel abroad. Local PMDC supporters raised alarm bells, so the chief's family organized one HIV/AIDS meeting in one village (Hanga), but no other action was taken by the GoSL. The Paramount Chief in Bo is particularly notorious. We heard reports that he has repeatedly threatened to shut down the local independent radio station for discussing issues that are critical of the SLPP government. We were told that he ordered police to open fire on PMDC supporters last year when Charles Margai and Vice President Berewa crossed paths at a 2005 school event in Bo that caused embarrassment to Berewa (ref B). (NOTE: Three police officers were reportedly reassigned after the incident. All of them had - thankfully - refused to follow the Paramount Chief's orders. END NOTE.)

¶7. (C) Another intimidation story involved an SLPP government minister (Minister of Transport and Communication Prince Harding) who convened an SLPP meeting on July 2 in Bo District. After the meeting, approximately 50 SLPP supporters went to a PMDC sub-office in Jembe Town and threatened to burn down the local PMDC Chairman's house and told PMDC supporters in the office, "We will have you killed by 2007." The PMDC Chairman reported the incident to the police and forwarded copies of an official complaint to the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), the National Electoral Commission (NEC), the All Parties Political Association (APPA), and civil society. To date, there has been no police (or other) action.

¶18. (C) Inaction and disengagement from NEC and PPRC toward what appear to be clear and gross violations of political rights was another common theme. We confirmed a story about the NEC's inaction in the face of the reported politicization of its youth training/employment program for voter registration, in which SLPP stalwarts in Bo had control of all the application forms and were allegedly giving them out only to SLPP youth. Opposition members complained that the NEC office should have handed out the forms to ensure equitable distribution. When asked, a NEC official told us that the application forms were being handed out at the locations where the training would take place, which is why (SLPP) officials at the Bo School had control of them. When we contacted the PPRC to verify the PMDC's story about the Minister of Transport and Communications' SLPP meeting that led to threats against PMDC supporters, we were told that the PPRC did not intend to take any action because they were only an information addressee on the letter of complaint.

¶19. (C) COMMENT: The NEC can ill afford to be seen as unconcerned in the face of political tampering, since they are already gaining a reputation as ineffective even when they do stand up to the ruling SLPP as the NEC's inability to stop the Biriwa chiefdom elections (ref A) showed. The NEC has been silent since its public Biriwa Chiefdom defeat and failed to capitalize on what could have been a clear opportunity to sanction the government and make a statement for its independence. END COMMENT.

¶10. (C) On September 15, UNIOSIL Executive Representative to the Secretary General Victor Angelo told the Ambassador, DCM and PolOff that the NEC has spent past few weeks trying to organize the move of its headquarters to a new building in Freetown. The chaos that characterized the move does not build confidence in the NEC's ability to organize a nationwide election, Angelo said, especially given the amount of time and energy the Commissioners spent bickering with one another over whose office would get more square footage. The PPRC is in even more dire straits, Angelo said, because they are without a chief commissioner and lack the staff capacity to even complete a registration verification exercise, much less adjudicate allegations of electoral wrongdoing.

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¶11. (C) Civil society has not stepped up to the plate, either, we learned. In spite of reassuring meetings in Freetown with the Africa Director of Search for Common Ground (SFCG), Frances Fortune, we heard contrary reports from the field. Fortune is the Chairman of National Elections Watch (NEW), a coalition of local NGOs who come together to focus on election observation issues. Civil society representatives in Bo, however, claimed that NEW members are mostly SLPP party loyalists who have been ineffective in observing past elections. We heard reports from two separate meetings that NEW leadership in Bo is already partisan because of the way Fortune appointed local leadership. (NOTE: Fortune is a Canadian national with extensive experience of the country and a frequent Government critic who stayed in Sierra Leone throughout the war years. Post will look into these allegations since USAID funds SFCG democracy and agricultural information programs, and is considering support to NEW. END NOTE.)

¶12. (C) Opposition political parties voiced frustration that no one is taking action on their grievances. Frustration was directed most clearly at police who failed to investigate reports of violence and intimidation (including a report that the Chairman of the Pujehun District Council paid a group of Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) soldiers to kill a PMDC supporter in Pujehun). It was also clear, though, that their expectations of the NEC, PPRC, and civil

society are low. For the most part, reports of intimidation and abuse are circulated within the party and to the police only. Some of the reports are making it up through the party structure to the All Political Parties Association (APPA), an independent organization of the parties that the SLPP organized but now boycotts. APPA has very recently made presentations of their complaints to UNIOSIL and the Diplomatic Corps that have filtered into the local press. UNIOSIL staff are investigating some of the allegations.

Unchecked Brinksmanship Will Lead to Violence

¶13. (C) Some of the opposition political party groups, particularly the APC which has long been harassed in the south and east, portrayed a sense of resignation in the face of the current political environment. Others, particularly the PMDC supporters in Bo and Kenema, made it clear that they intend to resist the government's attempts to deny their political rights. This has already led to isolated incidents of violence. For example, we heard that in Largo (Kenema District), PMDC supporters received police clearance to hold meetings but were attacked twice and therefore prevented from doing so.

¶14. (C) The threat of more serious violence is clear. Regarding a Kenema District paramount chief's refusal to allow a PMDC party meeting, we heard, "We are ready to go in by force." In Banderu (Kenema District), the chieftdom section speaker fined a PMDC supporter 200,000 leones (approximately USD 67), one goat, and five gallons of palm oil for holding a meeting. The 100 or so people who attended the meeting were punished as well, we were told, and banned indefinitely from farming and mining on chieftdom lands. When we asked what the attendees planned to do about it, we were told that the PMDC will inform the police and the UNIOSIL security advisor, but that the attendees would be instructed to continue farming and mining in defiance of the chieftaincy order. While this kind of behavior could expose the section speaker's bluff, it could also lead to violence should the SLPP loyalists decide to make a statement.

¶15. (C) In Bo, at least for now, opposition to the paramount chief's intimidation tactics are taking the form of people refusing to attend meetings when the paramount chief calls them. PMDC supporters told us, however, that people will only be pushed so far and will eventually stand up for their rights, which means that there is a potential for violence.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) Sustainable peace and democratic development in Sierra Leone will depend on credible elections in July 2007. Heightened tensions, hardball politics, and sporadic violence had characterized previous elections, but we did not expect to hear such extensive reports of SLPP intimidation and retribution to keep voters in line as the election is being

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organized and well ahead of the official campaign period. We were also surprised by PMDC strong organization that gives credibility to Margai's candidacy, and this undoubtedly accounts for some of the SLPP's abusive behavior. While we expect the SLPP to use its incumbency to try to manipulate the election and will use paramount chiefs to do its dirty work, there is nevertheless a real possibility that with the rise of the PMDC and with the reapportionment of many parliamentary districts to APC strongholds, the SLPP might not get a majority in the balloting. That threat could lead to violent confrontations that conceivably could destabilize the country.

¶17. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: APPA is emerging as an outlet for

opposition grievances and has opened channels of communication with the international community. The NEC and PPRC need to become receptive APPA complaints. The SLPP has denied them as fabrications, the evidence we found indicates otherwise. To be credible, reports must be investigated, but no single organization has the capacity. We have been told the UK intends to formally request from the UNSC a modest increase in UNIOSIL's police and defense liaison staff next month. We support that request as the best possibility for monitoring destailizing political abuses in Sierra Leone,s provinces.

¶18. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: In the end, it will come down to the NEC, PPRC, and civil society to check the abuses of the SLPP incumbents, educate voters on their rights, and ensure that the elections are not manipulated to favor the ruling party. If the political process is to retain the confidence of the opposition parties, NEC and the PPRC must become more effective, which will require more capacity building assistance from international donors. Sierra Leone,s network of civil society organizations and the media must step up their vigilance, and the international community, which can speak without fear or retribution, needs to raise its voice to ensure that the proverbial playing field will be as level as possible for the elections. The impediments are high, but so too will be the cost of failure. END COMMENT.

HULL